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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is designed to help teachers of young children (in preschools, day care centers, or kindergartens) improve their working relationship with parents through productive parent-teacher conferences. Several steps to be taken early in the school year or even before school begins include establishing and maintaining communication, clarifying expectations, making parents feel welcome, making home visits, and promoting parent involvement. Suggestions for conference preparation cover an optimal yearly schedule of conferences, distributing handouts on the purposes and expectations of conferences, organizing points to cover, preparing specific information about each child, and creating a positive environment for the discussion. The conference itself is described in four phases: (1) beginning the conference; (2) sharing information; (3) ending the conference; and (4) after the conference. Specific points to be covered within each phase are outlined and examples are given of what the teacher should and should not say. Two final sections address how to deal with special concerns in a conference and how and when to make a referral to another professional. Such issues as recognition and acceptance of a problem by parents, negative parental reactions, handling the parent's personal or family problems, and providing specific information about other sources of assistance are covered. (VW)

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PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES:

Building A Team

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Project Enlightenment, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a comprehensive early intervention/prevention program serving young children (birth to age six), their parents, teachers, and other child care givers. Administered through the Wake County Public School System and affiliated with Area Mental Health for Wake County, the Project has received local, state, and national recognition for its innovative approaches to prevention and early intervention, its effective service delivery system, and its positive influence in the community. Selected as a state model for early intervention, Project Enlightenment has also been selected as one of seven national models of preschool mental health programs by the Joint Information Service of the National Association for Mental Health.

Major services of Project Enlightenment include consultation to day care and preschool teachers, parent education, family counseling, teacher training, a demonstration preschool, community consultation and education, services to high risk infants, a TALKline telephone consultation service, and a Parent-Teacher Resource Center. In existence since 1969, the Project includes a multi-disciplinary staff of early childhood educators, parent education workers, and psychologists. Interested persons are invited to visit or write for additional information.

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES:
Building a Team

Kay Burgess
Lynne Johnson

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PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES:

Building A Team

In loving memory of

ELAINE S. CONRATH

who through her work as a Teacher-Parent Consultant at Project Enlightenment gave so much to the parents, teachers, and young children of Wake County.

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES: BUILDING A TEAM

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL—the two most important environments in young children's lives. With productive communication between home and school, important adults in a child's life work together to insure that the child gets the most out of his/her time at school.

On a day-to-day basis, parents and teachers may not communicate at all. If they do, it is typically through brief interchanges at the classroom door or notes sent back and forth. Without a scheduled time to sit down and talk, information about the child cannot be explained adequately, nor can the total picture of the child's functioning be understood. Through conferences, teachers and parents have the opportunity to pool their information and resources, to establish shared goals, and to work as a team toward meeting those goals.

Both teachers and parents have much to gain from parent-teacher conferences. A successful conference helps teachers gain insight and information about the child, which can then be used in creating a successful program. When parents are informed of a teacher's goals and objectives, they can be helpful in supporting them. Furthermore, children sense their parents' attitude toward their school; when parents convey a supportive attitude, children feel more positive and enthusiastic about their teachers and classroom. When parents' attitudes are negative, children may mirror these attitudes as well.

Because teachers see large numbers of children in one age group, they have a broader perspective to share with parents. They can provide valuable objective information about a child's strengths, weaknesses and behavior in a group setting. Sometimes, because of his/her unique vantage point, a teacher might detect a problem or recognize a talent earlier than the parents.

In addition, conferences offer parents an opportunity to provide feedback and gain assistance, involving them more in their child's education. At conferences, parents have a chance to tell the teacher what they are pleased about in the classroom, to ask questions about classroom activities and goals, and to share any classroom related

concerns they may have. Through a conference, parents can learn how to help a child with a new skill or a problem, e.g., helping Johnny learn to cut with scissors, or helping Mary learn to stop hitting other children.

ESTABLISHING PRE-CONFERENCE COMMUNICATION

EVEN BEFORE A CHILD ENTERS SCHOOL, TEACHERS CAN ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS. Every subsequent contact influences the impression parents form of their child's teacher. Teachers can help insure good rapport and a mutually supportive relationship from initial early contacts and parent orientation. Because pre-conference contacts are so important we begin with a section on ways to make the most of this contact.

CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS AND MAKE PARENTS FEEL WELCOME

AS PARENTS PREPARE THEIR CHILD TO ENTER PRESCHOOL, daycare, or kindergarten, teachers should clarify expectations of the program either through individual or group meetings. At registration, have written materials such as handouts, policy manuals, or contracts with clearly stated expectations which parents may sign. The week before school starts is a good time for a family picnic or an open house. At this time, a walk through the classroom, or a slide show illustrating a typical day at school could also be included to help parents feel a part of the school and better understand what will be expected of their children.

MAKE HOME VISITS

WHILE TIME CONSUMING, A HOME VISIT BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF SCHOOL IS AN EXCELLENT WAY TO ESTABLISH RAPPORT with parents. Such a visit is particularly helpful for parents who are anxious about their child's first experience in a new school. By seeing children and parents in their natural environment, teachers can help bridge the gap between home and school in the most personalized way. If a home visit is not possible, a postcard or phone call can help introduce you to your student and his/her parents and help them feel welcome.

PROMOTE PARENT INVOLVEMENT

MAKE PARENTS FEEL WELCOME to observe, to volunteer their help, to share their materials and special talents for school projects, to

provide snacks and to assist with field trips. Provide opportunities for working parents to be involved, e.g. ask them to make something at home, come for lunch or snack time, or to invite the class on a field trip to their work place. Plan periodic parent meetings, workshops, or social events. Remember to give enough advance notice of events so that parents can arrange their schedules.

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY

ON-GOING COMMUNICATION CAN BE INSURED with one or more of the following:

- a monthly newsletter or calendar of events
- a bulletin board near the door
- notes sent home with children about special activities
- telephone calls
- a telephone chain among parents for passing information along in a quick way
- a suggestion box at the door
- notes sent to children when they are sick or on birthdays
- any other ideas you may have to promote communication.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CONFERENCES

IN YOUR POLICY MANUAL OR OTHER HANDOUTS FOR PARENTS, explain in writing the purpose and expectations of conferences. Include a schedule of conference days in the yearly calendar, distributed at the beginning of school. When conference time arrives, send home a reminder and place sign-up sheets on the classroom door or call parents to schedule a time. Make sure to give parents a beginning and ending time. Describing conferences as "information sharing" sets a tone of collaboration.

AN OPTIMAL YEARLY SCHEDULE OF CONFERENCES includes:

- a pre-entrance meeting or home visit
- a fall conference held one or two months after a child has entered the program
- an early spring conference
- an end of year conference, as needed

IT IS IMPORTANT TO INVITE BOTH OF THE CHILD'S PARENTS to the conference. Even if both may not be able to attend, both should

have the option of attending. If you think it important that both parents hear the information you have to share, try to be flexible with your schedule. If the parents are divorced, check out with the child's custodial parent how he/she wants information handled with the noncustodial parent. Unless you plan to involve the child in the conference, ask parents to come without children or offer child care at school.

SOME TEACHERS PREFER TO INVITE A CHILD to all or part of a conference, particularly if there is a topic that would be beneficial for a child to discuss with both parents and teachers. This should be planned ahead of time with the parents and child.

IF A PARENT TRIES TO HOLD AN UNPLANNED CONFERENCE at drop-off or pick-up time, explain that your attention needs to be with the children and that you will be happy to set up a special time to talk with him/her later.

PLANNING THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

SET YOUR GOALS for the conference. Determine what you want to accomplish (for yourself, the child, and the parents) during this meeting.

ORGANIZE SPECIFIC POINTS you want to cover during the conference. Think about what you would want to know if you were that child's parent. Having some of the child's work available, making written observations of the child over several days, and recalling anecdotes involving the child helps parents recognize that you know their child as an individual. Some schools send home a developmental checklist for parents to complete before the conference. Others ask parents to bring a list of questions or send them to the teacher a few days in advance.

PREPARE SPECIFIC INFORMATION about the child.

REPORT ON THE CHILD'S DAILY ACTIVITIES to help parents get a sense of the child's day. Include the child's special interests, unique qualities, and relationships with friends.

SHARE THE CHILD'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS and what the child is working on in the following developmental areas:

- social - emotional - behavioral
- fine and gross motor
- speech/language
- cognitive
- self help

SHARE BOTH STRENGTHS (or "skills") AND WEAKNESSES (which can be phrased "areas of concern," "areas that a child needs help with, or "areas that need to be worked on.") If you share only the strengths, parents won't trust that you are telling them everything they need to know. If you share only weaknesses, parents may become defensive, discredit your information, stop listening, or tend to blame you for the problem. At a second or later conference, be sure to discuss progress in areas of concern since the last conference.

IF THERE ARE ISSUES YOU ARE UNCOMFORTABLE DISCUSSING or worries that you have about what might happen during the conference, consider discussing it with a colleague or resource person first to develop some strategies. Some teachers find role play or practice helpful for conferences that might be delicate or difficult.

IMAGINE WHAT IT MIGHT BE LIKE TO BE IN THE PARENTS' SHOES and what impact your remarks may have on them. Remember, children are very precious to their parents. Parents may feel their competency is being criticized through remarks about their child's weaknesses. Parents sometimes see their children as extensions of themselves. All parents like to hear they're doing a good job. Teachers might also come to conferences with similar fears of criticism. They, too, have a desire to hear positive feedback about their efforts in the classroom.

CREATING A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR A CONFERENCE

FIND A QUIET, PRIVATE PLACE where there will be no interruptions. Keep the door closed and use a "Do Not Disturb" sign if necessary.

MOST IMPORTANT, TRY TO MAKE THE PHYSICAL SETTING COMFORTABLE, INFORMAL, AND RELAXING. If available, offer coffee or other light refreshments. If possible, have adult-sized furniture and no barriers, such as desks, between people.

THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE: FOUR PHASES

PHASE ONE: BEGINNING THE CONFERENCE

The way you begin the conference sets the mood and tone for the rest of the meeting. If you begin in a positive manner, parents will be more

receptive to hearing what you have to say. In addition, remember that parents are sometimes anxious about what is going to be said and may feel uncomfortable about being in an unfamiliar setting. The following tips can help get the conference off to a good start:

BEGIN ON TIME.

GREET PARENTS, make introductions if necessary, make eye contact, and show a friendly facial expression.

MAKE APPROPRIATE "SMALL TALK" to break the ice, set parents at ease, and begin to establish rapport.

SHOW APPRECIATION for parents' attendance.

EXPLAIN THE REASON FOR THE CONFERENCE, how long it will take, and give an agenda.

Keep it brief, general, and, MOST IMPORTANT, use words which will help parents feel less threatened.

EXAMPLES:

"We're meeting today for about 30 minutes for our regular beginning of the year conference so that we can get to know each other a little better. I'd like to share with you Allison's progress in several areas, and I'd like to hear from you how you see her adjustment to school this year."

"We're meeting today for an hour to discuss Pam's progress in several areas and to discuss some concerns we have about behaviors we've seen at school lately. I'm hoping that if we put our heads together, we can try to understand why Pam's behavior might have changed recently and what we can do to help her."

START OUT WITH SOME POSITIVES ABOUT THE CHILD. Describe specific behaviors without using labels, generalizations, or comparisons to other children in the classroom or school. Giving your own observations of the child's classroom behavior is a useful technique for letting parents see how their child typically behaves.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T SAY	DO SAY
"Elizabeth is such a nice, sweet girl."	"Elizabeth has quickly made several good friends in the classroom. When she brings an item from home she shares it readily. She never has to be reminded to clean up."

"Michael is just doing great. He's so much smarter than the other children."

"Michael plays cooperatively with the boys. He takes turns easily. He has an excellent memory. When I read *Pinnochio* Michael remembered all the details for several days and acted out the story with some of the children. I notice Michael is also beginning to read."

Give the parents a chance to talk, early in the conference, so that you may get a sense of how they see their child and the school. Notice their words as well as their body language to get a feeling for their attitudes, perceptions and concerns. Avoid "yes-no" questions. You can draw the parents out best with open-ended, neutral questions such as: "Describe for me how you see Ginny adjusting to (or liking) school this year so far?" or, "Tell me how Charlie feels about coming to school this year?"

PHASE TWO: SHARING INFORMATION

Once good rapport has been established, it's time to get down to specifics.

ASK PARENTS IF THEY HAVE PARTICULAR QUESTIONS or topics they want to discuss.

TRY TO GET A PICTURE OF HOW THE PARENTS SEE THE CHILD AT HOME. Ask for information in a factual manner. Avoid an interrogating or blaming tone.

EXAMPLES:

"So that I can know Matt better, tell me a little about how he gets along with children in the neighborhood."

"Tell me about the activities Laura likes to do at home."

BUILD ON THE PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHILD. Avoid using jargon; try to use the parents' own words and phrases.

EXAMPLE:

If a parent comments, "Jeremy acts 'babyish' all the time," ask the parents . . . "tell me some more about how he acts 'babyish' at home."

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED ABOUT SPECIFIC PROBLEM AREAS. assess whether parents have similar concerns and give them a chance to mention it first. When there's a problem, parents ten to be less

defensive if they are the first to identify it. (Detailed information about discussing problems is provided in the next section.)

OFTEN WE OVERLOOK A CHILD'S STRENGTHS AND FOCUS ON HIS OR HER WEAKNESSES. When appropriate, reassure parents that children cannot be expected to be perfect in all areas. Help parents see ways in which they can build on their child's strengths. Whenever possible, support the positive things parents are doing with the child at home. Help parents feel you're working as a team for the child's benefit.

EXAMPLE:

"Tommy is so cooperative at clean-up time, I can see you've worked on that a lot at home."

THE TIMING OF WHEN YOU GIVE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHILD IS A KEY FACTOR. Try to interweave the positives and negatives as you discuss each important area of a child's functioning (e.g., social/emotional, fine and gross motor, language, etc.) Do not save the most difficult topic for the last five minutes when there won't be sufficient time to discuss it in depth. Allow time to summarize and to end the conference on a positive note.

WHENEVER POSSIBLE AND APPROPRIATE, REASSURE PARENTS with information about normal development.

EXAMPLE:

"Most 4 year olds have questions about sex, and here's how we are handling these questions at school."

KEEP THE CONFERENCE FOCUSED. It's easy to get off track and start discussing irrelevant topics.

EXAMPLES:

"Let's finish discussing _____ before we go on to _____ ."
"Let's get back to talking about _____ ."
"We have about 10 minutes left and we need to be sure to cover _____ ."

PHASE THREE: ENDING THE CONFERENCE

NOTIFY PARENTS OF THE CONFERENCE'S APPROACHING END. "We have about five more minutes. Let's summarize what we've been talking about." Plan your conference so it will end on time.

OFFER A CHANCE FOR THE PARENTS TO BRING UP FINAL QUESTIONS or comments.

SUMMARIZE AND REPEAT THE ACTION TO BE TAKEN by the parents and teacher. Be clear in spelling out each role, especially if there has been a disparity of viewpoints between the teacher and parent.

EXAMPLES:

"It's clear that Tom has made an excellent adjustment to school. He learns quickly and makes friends easily. He is a little shy in groups, but not more so than lots of children his age. I will continue to help him feel more comfortable talking at group time. It will be helpful for you to continue making sure he brings something on days we have show and tell. It's not necessary for you to question him about his participation each day. I'll send you a note at the end of each week and we'll have another conference in a month."

"I feel we've come up with some good ideas to help Matt continue his progress. I agreed to do _____ and you said you would do _____. This looks like a good plan for Matt. Let's keep in touch and let me know if I can help in other ways."

"Today we talked about Jeremy and what a quick adjustment he has made to starting school here. We did agree that you would have his speech checked at the Speech and Hearing Clinic and I would let you know how he seems to be progressing with speech development. Also, if he has an ear infection, let me know that too. Thanks so much for coming today. I feel we have a good plan."

"You've decided you would rather wait and see if Sally will feel better without going to the doctor. We agreed to wait a week and I will contact you to see if we both feel Sally seems less tired and has more energy."

END ON A POSITIVE NOTE to show appreciation of the parents' participation. This helps set a good tone for future contact and reinforces the team effort.

PHASE FOUR: AFTER THE CONFERENCE

SPEND A FEW MINUTES AFTER EACH CONFERENCE TO REFLECT ON IT and critique how it went. In doing so, look at your strengths and weaknesses in handling the conference. Consider the process—as well as the outcome.

MAKE NOTES OF SPECIFIC THINGS that you need and the parents agreed to do and/or the next meeting time.

KEEP A NOTEBOOK FOR PARENT CONFERENCES so that all notes will be in the same place and can be readily available for future parent contacts.

DEALING WITH SPECIAL CONCERNS IN CONFERENCE

DISCUSSING PROBLEM AREAS

Because teachers are in the unique position of seeing so many children in one age group, when something is atypical they may see it long before the parents do. The earlier a problem is detected and help is obtained, the more likely a change can occur. Teachers, therefore, have an obligation to inform parents as early as possible when something is amiss. Don't wait until your frustration with the child has built up to the point where you come across negatively to the parent. Here are some guidelines:

DON'T OVERWHELM PARENTS. Even though you may be frustrated with a child, it is important not to unload too much on the parent at one time. Choose just one or two problem areas to discuss.

BE CLEARLY DESCRIPTIVE TO THE PARENTS ABOUT A PARTICULAR CONCERN. Try to "paint a picture" so the parents can see behavior as you do.

USE SPECIFIC, OBJECTIVE DESCRIPTIONS of behavior.

EXAMPLES:

DON'T SAY	DO SAY
"Jeremy is too aggressive."	"Jeremy hits other children who won't share a toy the first time he asks for it."
"Nancy is too passive."	"Nancy sits back during free play and won't join in or choose an activity on her own."
"Jerry acts like a baby."	"Jerry knows how to put his coat on but he often says, 'I can't do it.'"

Remember: If parents see you as blaming and attacking, they will become defensive and stop listening!

DISCUSS PROBLEM AREAS IN TERMS OF, "I'M CONCERNED ABOUT," "I'm worried about . . ." rather than, "I'm having a problem with . . ." or "Johnny has a problem . . ."

WHEN THE PROBLEM AREA YOU NEED TO DISCUSS IS NOT THE CHILD'S responsibility but the parents', you can lessen the parents' defensiveness and elicit cooperation by showing understanding.

EXAMPLES:

"I know how busy mornings are getting children off to school and how insistent children can be about wearing what they want to wear; but when Billy comes to school in short sleeves on cold days, he refuses to go out on the playground. Could you send a jacket or sweater we can keep at school or make sure he brings one on cold days, even if he won't put it on?"

"I realize 5:30 is a hectic time of day for us all — last minute things at work and traffic jams can cause delays. However, our center closes at 5:30 and our staff has other obligations. It is important that Megan be picked up on time."

IF THEY HAVEN'T SAID SO ALREADY, YOU CAN ASK PARENTS IF THEY SEE CERTAIN BEHAVIOR PATTERNS AT HOME. If they say they don't, then ACCEPT IT and AVOID trying to convince them otherwise. Explain that children sometimes behave very differently at home and school, and that children behave differently with different people. Observation in the classroom is a useful technique for having parents see typical children's behavior. When parents are seeing their child very differently than the teacher, an invitation to observe may help.

GIVE PARENTS A CHANCE TO REACT AND VENTILATE. Listen, listen, listen!

IF YOU NEED TO ADD WEIGHT TO YOUR CONCERNS, discuss the problem in terms of how it might affect the child's IMMEDIATE future if it continues. (Don't predict what the child will be like as a teenager!) Or, talk about how the problem is affecting the child's peer relationships.

EXAMPLES:

"I'm afraid that if we don't help Johnny with his self-help skills now, it might interfere with his feeling confident in public kindergarten."

"I'm concerned that Ellen's classmates may avoid playing with her completely since she has started hitting so frequently."

WHEN PARENTS BECOME RECEPTIVE, DEVELOP A PLAN of action and collaboration. Use phrases like: "Let's share our thoughts on what we can do about Jennifer's pinching." "Let see how we can work to help Andy with paying attention." "Since learning takes place at home and

school, let's plan some specific activities." If possible, take parents' ideas first and expand on how you can use them at school.

EXAMPLE:

"Your idea of grouping Joe's clothes at home so they match and letting him choose his clothes in the morning is a good idea for encouraging his independence. Let's both encourage him to dress himself."

IF PARENTS REVEAL TOO MANY PERSONAL PROBLEMS, show understanding, but be careful not to become a parent therapist, not to use too many personal examples, or to give too much advice. Stick to your role as teacher. You can accomplish this by refocusing on the child's needs and saying something like, "Gee, I don't feel as qualified to help in those areas as I do in the classroom." You might also consider referring the parent to a personal or family counselor as needed.

MAKING A REFERRAL

Sometimes it is important to get additional information or help with a child from outside resources such as psychologists, speech therapists, pediatricians, hearing specialists, etc.

ALTHOUGH TEACHERS ARE AT TIME RELUCTANT TO REFER A PARENT FOR RESOURCE HELP, they have a professional responsibility to do so when it is needed. When a teacher is unsure about whether a referral is necessary, it is helpful to discuss the situation with a co-worker, consultant, or another professional for a second opinion.

SOMETIMES TEACHERS ARE HESITANT TO MAKE REFERRALS because they sense parents might reject the idea or be frightened or overwhelmed by it. In such instances it is often easier for a parent to see the concerns and accept a referral if at least one preliminary conference has been held to discuss the problem and strategize a way to help the child at home and school without a referral. Then, a second conference can be held to evaluate and discuss referral to an outside source if no change has occurred. The parent may be more willing to follow through after a concerted effort has been made to work on the problem without referral.

EXAMPLE:

"Let's try this for the next two weeks, then meet again to evaluate the progress we've made and where to go from there."

IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW YOUR OWN LIMITS AS A PROFESSIONAL and not to take on a role that you're unqualified to fill

because a parent is too reluctant to seek help elsewhere. Don't be hesitant to let parents know that you don't have all the answers. Letting parents know that you need help may encourage them to seek help as well.

EXAMPLES:

"I need help with what I can do to help Susie further. I have done everything I know."

"I don't know the answer to that."

"Let me think about it and talk to the staff about it."

"I wish I could answer that question, but I can't and I think a professional (speech therapist, psychologist, etc.) could probably answer that for you and help me know how to work with Janie better in the classroom."

WHEN REFERRING A PARENT TO AN OUTSIDE RESOURCE, it is important to be supportive and show understanding about how the parents feel. It is also helpful to offer realistic, but not false, reassurances.

PROVIDING SPECIFIC INFORMATION ABOUT ALTERNATIVE REFERRALS can help a parent feel less overwhelmed. Such concrete information as pamphlets, brochures, phone numbers and the name of a contact person at a referral agency are usually appreciated.

IT IS OFTEN EXTREMELY HELPFUL TO REFERRAL SOURCES if they receive information about teachers concerns and perceptions of a child. Since the teacher's information is confidential, obtain written permission from the parents before sharing information with an outside resource.

REMEMBER THAT PARENTS HAVE TO ARRIVE AT ACCEPTANCE OF THEIR CHILD'S PROBLEM AT THEIR OWN PACE. In order to face the problem some parents may need to hear similar concerns from teachers and other adults over several years. Your impact may simply be to add to a line of significant adults who give the parents a similar message. And, that, in itself, can be an important contribution. Remember, ultimately seeking help is the parents' decision.

IN CONCLUSION . . .

Since parents have the most knowledge about their children and teachers know the most about their program, effective parent-teacher collaboration serves an essential function in meeting the needs of children through early childhood education. We hope the tips provided in this pamphlet prove helpful to teachers trying to develop and improve their skills in building effective relationships with parents. Although we tried to be specific, it is important to remember that there is no prescription for conducting conferences.

Just like teaching, working with parents is an ongoing process. Just as we can learn from each child we teach, we can also learn from each conference we conduct. When given the opportunity most parents are eager to establish a team and work with you.

Remember, when teachers and parents work together children benefit the most from their early education.

This booklet is one of a continuing series of booklets of interest to parents and teachers of young children. Please write Project Enlightenment for a list of topics in this series or for information about other Project publications.

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